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Masha Belenky, *Engine of Modernity: The Omnibus and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019. xii + 183 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. £85.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 9781526138590; £20.00 U.K. (pb). ISBN 9781526160218; £20.00 U.K. (eb). ISBN 9781526138613.

Review by Marina van Zuylen, Bard College.

We find ourselves in a fluid cultural moment: we are exhilarated by and yet fearful of the advances in technology; we have never had more of a voice, we have never had less of a voice; we are experiencing unprecedented forms of sociability, but have never been so isolated; we want things to move faster, but are nostalgic for a slower pace of life. If these issues surface in 2022, they were also of pressing concern for the protagonists of Masha Belenky's riveting new book, *Engine of Modernity: The Omnibus and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris*. Not since Anson Rabinbach's *The Human Motor* or Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *The Railway Journey* has a study tapped so deftly and subtly into the particular ambivalences brought about by locomotion.[1] If the birth of the omnibus is so connected to our time, it is because Belenky chooses to discuss questions that resonate well beyond her chosen topic—our own uncertain responses to a shifting world, to boundaries made increasingly porous, to unprecedented tensions between public and private, and to the changing nature of gendered expectations. The omnibus may well be one of the driving engines of modernity, but to Belenky, it is also the blueprint for literary genre-bending, innovative storytelling devices, and collaborative authorship. Thanks to *Engines of Modernity*, scholars and generalists alike will rethink nineteenth-century French culture through the omnibus's detours and diversions. Rambling through the city of paradoxes that is Paris, the omnibus, not only inspired “micro-narratives organized around the flow of passengers,” but produced and “visually staged performance[s] of class identity” (p. 47). History, literature, and art history crisscross in a book divided in witty and informative chapter subsections: “Modernity at a horse's trot,” “Surfing the omnibus literature,” “The omnibus flâneur,” “Looking out,” “Looking in,” “A journey into nowhere,” “Buses, breasts and babies.” These clever subtitles make this learned tome a rare readerly pleasure, as do the illustrations, brilliant pendants to the writing: the replica of the 1828 ordonnance establishing the omnibus, its detailed trajectories, the sheet-music scores, omnibus-inspired games, maps, newspaper clippings are supplemented by the often hilarious illustrations by, among others, Daumier, Cham, Vernier, Gobert, Darjou, and Grandville. The book's tone and the choice of images deliver a levity rarely found in such a solid historically-based study. Characters being hauled out of windows, disruptive behatted figures erupting into carriages, drunken men squished between high-minded women, budding romances, an enormous dog hiding in its owner's dress, and the inimitable Madame Crinoliska filling the entire omnibus with her sea of crinoline in Adam Albert's 1859 lithograph, “Paris

Grotesque.” As Edouard Gourdon’s 1842 *Physiology de l’omnibus* testifies, the diversity of tone, style, register, subject matter encountered in and inspired by these horse-drawn vehicles helped shape cultural production in the broadest sense.[2]

With great ingenuity, Belenky uses the omnibus as an interpretative agent, the site of outlandish theatrics. *Engine of Modernity* will be essential reading for anyone interested in the long nineteenth century, in the phenomenology of urban experience, in gender politics and class warfare. Never sacrificing style for content, the book is not only written with wit and precision, but it is unmatched for its archival discoveries. Belenky has rethought with great aplomb ways in which the omnibus simultaneously altered the shape of literature and of the city. The snapshots glimpsed from the omnibus’ windows, the voyeuristic glances between travelers and passers-by, had a significant impact on urban planning. Speed, indeed, requires new forms of spatial organization. Space was being newly appropriated, altered by body practices; the cramped seats of the omnibus provide us with a new foundation upon which to decode nineteenth-century social conditions. Belenky animates and contrasts two of the main takes on the omnibus: is it an “an ideal social laboratory,” fostering fraternity and democracy, or is it a money-making machine, not a symbol of equality at all, but “a vehicle that brings to the fore bourgeois hypocrisy, makes visible social divisions and calls out society’s inability to achieve progress” (p. 115)? The book’s dialectical quality allows the reader to shift from utopian dreams to veritable horror stories. One of Belenky’s central claims is that “the omnibus served as a complex and equivocal symbol of social class in nineteenth-century popular literature, rather than a straightforward emblem of class inclusiveness as the vehicle’s name asserts” (p. 104). It reflected two realities at once. Some saw it evolving in “a city dominated by breakdown of communication and social relationships, a place where inhabitants came into fleeting contact only to never see each other again”; others, on the contrary, welcomed it as a fertile terrain where “individual connections and felicitous chance encounters were possible and led to lasting attachments” (p. 84).

In polyphonic fashion, *Engine of Modernity* lets its readers switch between these two clashing scenarios. To the likes of Gourdon, it is an “échantillon d’autant plus fidèle qu’il varie sans cesse...un miroir où toutes les silhouettes grandes et petites, sombres et bouffonnes, viennent se décalquer,”[3] whereas to Louis Huart, it is the exacerbation of “old hierarchical structures, rather than the embodiment of progress” (p. 114). If the omnibus’ genesis, as many have claimed, can help historians understand Parisian society, this history has many of the ingredients of fiction. What it needed was a different kind of historian, one who could exemplify the utopian *omnibus imaginaire* as well as what Théophile Gautier labeled, “ce léviathan de la carrosserie.”[4] Belenky succeeds brilliantly at this task. Her research and use of images highlight how contemporary observers read this “modern-day Noah’s Ark” in fundamentally divergent ways.[5] Will we remember it as that symbol of equality embedded in its name, or as its opposite, “a vehicle that brings to the fore bourgeois hypocrisy, makes visible social divisions and calls out society’s inability to achieve progress” (p. 115)? Reading between the lines, Belenky builds her riveting narrative on the constant shifts between these conflicting interpretations: “For some, Paris was a place of alienation and disconnection, a city dominated by the breakdown of communication and social relationships, a place where inhabitants came into fleeting contact only to never see each other again. For others, on the contrary, it was a world where individual connections and felicitous chance encounters were possible and led to lasting attachments” (p. 84). The omnibus was either associated with the utopian socialism of Saint-Simonianism or denounced as a fake dream, or as in Zola’s *Au Bonheur des dames*, an “instrument of physical mutilation and death” (p. 66). Less dramatic, but equally mistrustful is Flaubert’s fear that the

omnibus promoted “destructive uniformity, an ultimate erasure of boundaries between social groups and the disappearance of distinction that had long been the hallmark of the upper classes.”[6] Flaubert’s misgivings are echoed by the many of the lithographs in the book, visual dramatizations of class, portraying “the omnibus as a battleground where the lower and middle classes confront the need to continuously renegotiate their social space, reflecting the changing structures of a society in flux” (pp. 124-125).

Belenky helps us put the romanticized or demonized omnibus in perspective and takes us through its reputation’s bumpy road. Who can we trust? The journalists who wanted to believe in the idealized omnibus, painted as “une école de la politesse” and “fostering proper codes of conduct in a public place?”(p. 107) Is it possible that elegant poseurs truly relinquished their vanity and shredded “leurs grâces sur les coussins” as soon as they entered these egalitarian vehicles?[7] If some hoped for such equality, a world that was intolerant to any form of privilege, others were duly skeptical. Balzac called it unaffordable;[8] Madame de Flesselle in her didactic guide for young people visiting Paris, *Les Jeunes voyageurs dans Paris* (1829) complained that it barred passengers based on their clothing. Louis Huart in an 1834 essay felt that it expanded hierarchies and contributed to the ill-treatment, even the abandonment, of women. Huart goes as far as denouncing “the democratic utopian ideals that some writers attached to this vehicle [and] contests the democratic utopian ideals...seeing it instead as a continuation and perhaps even expansion of old hierarchies” (p. 113). One of the many strengths of the book is to illustrate the “darker vision of what the omnibus meant in terms of class” (p. 125). Far from Octave Uzanne’s idealized portrait of a vehicle that “unit toutes les classes sociales sans distinction ni division” and offered “la plus parfaite image de la démocratie et fraternité courtoise,”[9] Belenky finds numerous counter-examples where class anxiety comes to a head. The analysis of Maupassant’s “La dot” is particularly dramatic. Not only is it the appalling tale of a wronged bride abandoned by her husband, but it is a case where the omnibus itself becomes “the space that symbolizes the heroine’s dramatic downfall” (p. 125).

Belenky picks up details that most poignantly illustrate the double life of the omnibus. It is the site of possibility, of adventure, but it can also be the final step in somebody’s foiled destiny. Jeanne, coming from her *campagne* not only discovers that her husband has disappeared with the dowry, but she becomes the first-hand witness of a disaffected world, one that directly contradicts the alleged type of travel that was supposed to promote fraternization. Both conductor and station manager express utter indifference. Their response is “emblematic of the alienation and indifference characteristic of the big city” (p.126): “Bon, ce n’est rien, occupez-vous de votre service. Et il tourna les talons.”[10] There is something tragic and yet comical in such a wretched spectacle. Standing by like birds on a wire, Maupassant observes: “Tous les autres voyageurs, alignés et muets,—un garçon épicier, une ouvrière, un sergent d’infanterie, un monsieur à lunette d’or coiffé d’un chapeau à bords énormes et relevés comme des gouttières, des dames à l’air important et grincheux, qui semblaient dire par leur attitude : —Nous sommes ici, mais nous valons mieux que ça...” [11] At the same time that Jeanne’s life is upended, the rest of the travelers are still thinking about their place in the hierarchy. This drama allows Belenky to feature the high and the low, making visible the omnibus’ diversity. But in Maupassant’s tale, the omnibus workers, the conductor, the ticket master (*le buraliste*), the driver, and the passengers do nothing to help ruined Jeanne. As these occupations “began to appear in literature...they thus elicited both fascination and discomfort” (p. 83).

No wonder, then, that the omnibus was so often met with suspicion. Those traveling in their protective private carriages, unmistakable status symbols, dreaded the imminence of change and eyed warily such consummate forms of proximity. To them, these jam-packed carriages broke revered boundaries, disrupted the social order, and, horror of horrors, created traffic jams. At a time when Paris was doubling in population, the privileged also associated this “menacing machine” with ominous and unruly crowds (p. 7). In what seemed to have happened in the blink of an eye, their place in the Parisian elite was suddenly made insecure, and they were thrown together with “domestiques et maîtres, ouvriers, rentiers, poètes, financiers, comédiens.”[12] To make things worse, everybody was paying the same rate. The “erasure of physical boundaries between bourgeois and the working class” was the arena in which the lower and middle classes confronted the need to continuously renegotiate their social space (p. 121). Whether Maupassant’s grocery clerk or his posh “monsieur,” sporting his gold-rimmed glasses, life was becoming like a bad *feuilleton* and you never knew which character would pop up next to you on your next trip.

Belenky is particularly sensitive to the ways in which perception of time and speed were tied to the omnibus. Nostalgia for slowness and *flânerie* were on people’s minds. In her weekly column in *La Presse* (1837), Delphine de Girardin mourned the demise of and danger for her leisurely walks: “La promenade est impossible; il y a peine de mort pour le flâneur”. [13] But in her typically discerning way, Belenky mostly points to the omnibus as a great source for the flâneur’s and the writer’s imagination. “Le flâneur compose tout un roman, rien que sur la simple rencontre en omnibus d’une petite dame en voile baissée,” writes Louis Huart. [14] And pointing to Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project*, Belenky reminds us about the link between “the act of urban strolling and the experience of public transport,” but evoking Baudelaire “for whom the flâneur is a quintessential modern poet,” she shows that ultimately the role of “alienated interpreter of the city” was not going to outlast Haussmannisation (p. 64). Quoting Priscilla Ferguson, she reminds us that in the “final decades of the nineteenth century, the association between *flânerie* and writing wanes,” even becoming banal (p. 64). The omnibus, despite its providing such fodder for “urban ethnography,” [16] such a prime setting for social observation, also inevitably caused the urban pace to change. Not only that, the omnibus was also becoming a “form of social policing, imposing corporeal control and restraint on passengers’ bodies and even their clothing” (p. 107).

Priscilla Ferguson’s work figures prominently in these pages and it is particularly distressing that she never got to see one of her most brilliant students’ second book come to fruition. There are underlying tributes to her notion of “moral geography,” to her insights connecting urban mobility and transgression, and more generally, to her having inspired Belenky’s own thinking about ways in which “omnibus literature addressed women’s participation in modern urban life.” [15] So many of Belenky’s intuitions follow Ferguson’s view of nineteenth-century Paris as a metropolis “rooted in this sense of movement, the perpetually unfinished, always provisional nature of the present and the imminence of change.” [17] Much appreciated by this reviewer was Belenky’s celebratory depiction of women in public transport. From Colette’s 17-year-old Claudine’s “scandalous” solo trip in an omnibus, to the “joyful celebration of the omnibus as a medium for a woman’s carefree urban exploration,” the book understands the omnibus also as one of the few private spaces where, as in Mary Cassatt’s color print *En Omnibus*, women could “safely perform their femininity” (p. 159). Belenky’s discussion of gendered spaces (boulevards, restaurants, theaters, department stores, parks) will inspire many students of the nineteenth century to continue to question “the hegemony of the public-private dichotomy and the ideology of separate spheres” (p. 136).

Engine of Modernity is not only a remarkable piece of writing, it is an unflinching homage to many of the *dix-neuviémistes* who are thanked and quoted in these pages and will find this an essential addition to the field.

NOTES

[1] Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

[2] Édouard Gourdon, *Physiologie de l'omnibus* (Paris: Terry, 1842), p. 75.

[3] Gourdon, p. 95.

[4] Théophile Gautier, "Préface," in Edouard Fournier, *Paris démoli* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1883), p. v.

[5] See Emmeline Raymond, "L'Omnibus," *La Mode illustrée* (1862): 351-352.

[6] To Louise Colet. *Correspondance* (1856) (Paris: L. Conard, 1926-1954), p. 21.

[7] "Quelques remarques sur les omnibus," *Le Magasin pittoresque* (1843): 103.

[8] Honoré de Balzac, *Correspondance* (1832), ed. Roger Pierrot, vol.1 (Paris: Garnier, 1960), p. 380.

[9] Octave Uzanne, "Omnibus de Paris", *Le Monde Moderne*, 1.28 (1900), p. 483.

[10] Guy de Maupassant, *Contes et Nouvelles*, ed. Albert-Marie Schmidt and Gérard Delaisement (Paris: Albin Michel, 1957), p. 564.

[11] Maupassant, *Contes et Nouvelles*, p. 562.

[12] Uzanne, p. 483.

[13] *Chroniques parisiennes*, ed. Jean-Louis Vissière (Paris: Des femmes, 1986), pp. 110-111.

[14] Louis Huart, *Physiologie du flâneur* (Paris: Aubert, 1841), p. 55.

[15] Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, "The flâneur on and off the streets of Paris," in *The Flâneur*, ed. Keith Tester (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 22.

[16] The term "urban ethnography" is invoked by David Frisby, "The Flâneur in Social Theory," in *The Flâneur*.

[17] Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, *Paris as Revolution: Writing the Nineteenth-Century City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 35. Ferguson's *Paris as Revolution* inspired an entire generation of scholars and plays an important role throughout *Engine of Modernity*.

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